

THE BLIND MENTALLY RETARDED IN AMERICA.

Gabriel Farrell.

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IN AMERICA**

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Director, Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind



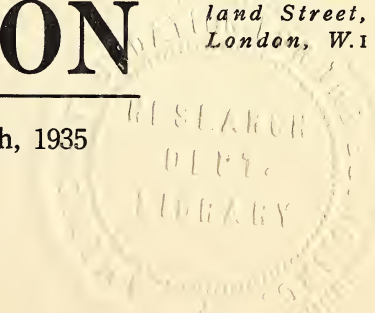
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THE BLIND MENTALLY RETARDED IN AMERICA

By Dr. GABRIEL FARRELL

THE problem of affording blind children who are retarded mentally the training which is their right and which is based upon their ability to absorb, is one that gravely concerns those responsible for the sightless on both sides of the Atlantic. On this side there has been much talk and perplexity, while on the other side, I understand, there has been some definite accomplishment. On both sides there seems to be the same quandary over whether the responsibility for the care of these children falls upon those in charge of the mentally retarded or those in charge of the blind. Is the fundamental difficulty the lack of mental ability or the lack of sight? To answer that question is merely to add more words to the discussion. What is needed is evidence from experience as to whether the doubly handicapped child receives the best possible training among other mentally retarded children or among blind children.

Under the latter alternative we have evidence enough that this association should not be in a school for normal blind children. The retarded child is constantly at a disadvantage when forced to work side by side with children who are manifestly superior and where the programme is geared for minds that work faster than his. This situation is bad for the retarded child as it means that he is always at the tail end which thwarts whatever ambition he may have. It is also bad for the normal child because the class is held back, to say nothing of the demoralizing effect that the presence of abnormal children frequently has upon sensitive children of high intelligence. This being the case, it is apparent that if the blind mentally retarded are to be kept together they must be in a separate school.

Before discussing this alternative let us consider the matter of placing the blind mentally retarded among seeing children with defective mental ability. To many this seems the wisest and most hopeful way. In 1914 at a conference on this subject "it was definitely agreed that these children belonged in a school for the feeble-minded: that they should be scattered among the seeing feeble-minded who would care for them and that a special teacher should be employed."

While it is true that practically all institutions for the mentally retarded or the feeble-minded have some blind inmates, most of them are idiots or imbeciles incapable of training. Children of that low grade require custodial care, and are not problems in so far as training is concerned. The group in which we are especially interested is composed of those too retarded to keep up with normal children, and yet capable of training which will make them happier, if not entirely self-sustaining citizens.

It has been difficult for those in charge of the blind to prevail upon the officers of schools for the mentally retarded that this group offers an appealing opportunity for constructive and deserved training even though many of the leaders in this field admit that the problem is rightly theirs. When, however, the fact that most of these schools have long waiting lists is considered, it is easy to understand the reluctance to take on a new group. But among the many there is always one ready to make the venture. In this case the individual in this country is Dr. C. T. Jones, Superintendent of the New Jersey State Colony at New Lisbon.

This is a new colony for boys and men which is being built along modern lines under the direction of Dr. Jones. The buildings are all new and adequately equipped, and the programme is one that shows intelligent planning and foresight. It was my pleasure to visit the colony not long ago, partly to learn of the class for blind boys established there and partly to see Dr. Jones, who happens to be a college classmate.

In 1932 Dr. Jones became concerned over the presence of eight or ten boys without sight. These boys had been committed to the Colony because their defective vision made it impossible for them to go to regular schools, and their deficient mental ability made them incapable of absorbing the training offered by the State Commission for the Blind, under the able direction of Miss Lydia Y. Hayes, a graduate of Perkins. Many of the boys had attended schools for the blind and had struggled with the rudiments of the Braille system without success. A few had learned simple handwork, but not enough to warrant their continuance in a non-custodial environment. Consequently in April, 1932, a special class for the blind was formed within the school department.

Before this class was formed these boys had been assigned to handwork and Occupational Therapy groups, but the placement was none too happy. Far less efficient than the seeing boys, the blind boys needed a great deal of supervision and direction, and their lower production-rate, from a social standpoint, was embarrassing and conducive to unfavourable personality reactions. Also, those boys who had laboured to learn Braille regretted the lack of opportunity to continue where they had left off.

Upon the formation of the special class, Mr. Donald Burns, who was graduated from the Pennsylvania Institution for the Blind and also from the University of Pennsylvania, was engaged as teacher and he has been in charge of the work ever since. From the first, the programme has been experimental. The primary object is to keep all of the boys occupied and satisfied. To those who desire it, individual attention and assistance in Braille is provided. To all these are available the various simple handwork projects, spool-knitting, chain-knitting, braiding. As the experiment progressed, the programme was expanded and varied. To-day, as the result of flexible and sympathetic planning, the group is not only one of the happiest but also one of the most productive in the entire institution.

The teaching in the Class for the Blind is highly individualized. Along academic lines, the work comprises Braille reading and writing, and also history, geography, arithmetic, treated orally or in written work, according to the capacity of the individual. Listed in order of increasing difficulty, the handwork includes: spool-knitting, chain-knitting, braiding, caning of footstools, chair-caning, and the making of loop belts. A visitor to the class will find all of these activities under way at any time. Certain of the boys, unable to do more than the simplest handwork, devote almost all of their time to the one occupation. The same is true of eager readers who are unable to master handwork. Indeed, much of the success of the class may be attributed to the fact that the programme is so planned as to provide for every boy the opportunity to do what he can do and to make the doing of it congenial and pleasant.

The class at the time of my visit numbered fifteen. The average mental age was nine years. Five boys had general levels of seven years or less, and had been classified as of imbecile ability. Seven

of the boys performed at a level of from eight to eleven years, classified as moron level. Three of the boys were of average normal or inferior normal ability; one of these was committed because of behaviour difficulties, the other two because of deafness and crippled conditions.

Dr. J. Garton Needham, resident psychologist at the Colony, makes this report on the work of the class: "The progress of the class is slow; perhaps the most necessary qualification for the supervisor is patience. However, there are seven boys who have progressed from primer level in Braille or less to first or second grade levels. Others, by long practice, have advanced from the reading-by-rote stage to the reading-for-pleasure stage. Likewise with the handwork: two boys are expert caners, two are very proficient with the belts. One boy spent two years in learning to make a practice caning frame. Seldom is the learning rate even an approximation to the expectation. However, the morale and spirit of the Class for the Blind is such that willingness and perseverance are the rule, and each boy, doing what he is best able to do, is happy to do the best that he can."

As one of the leading men in this country on the care of the mentally defective Dr. Jones was asked to give his conclusion based upon his three years' experience with this Class for the Blind. Dr. Jones writes: "Our experience shows that a plan for giving special training to a group of blind boys of sub-normal mentality in an institution for mental defectives is entirely practical. The members of a group of this kind are apparently happier when they have some contacts with seeing people of their mental level and yet receive training especially adapted to their condition. Better results are accomplished when a considerable amount of individual instruction is given each boy by the teacher. The success of such a project depends largely on the ability of a teacher to secure the co-operation of the brighter boys in assisting him with the training of the younger and less mature members of the group."

Certainly the class as I visited it was actively and happily at work. It might be well to point out that the segregation of the blind boys is only in the school department. The boys have not participated in the work programme of the other inmates, but when I told Dr. Jones

of our success with a gardening course he agreed to consider giving his blind boys a chance to work on the farm. The blind boys live in the cottages assigned according to age and mental rating, and it is this association with seeing boys who are their peers that gives value to the policy of placing blind mentally retarded children in these special schools and not in separate institutions for the blind only.

Even though it would seem that the more desirable plan is to commit the blind of this group to these special schools it may not be possible to accomplish it. There is the problem of overcrowding in the present schools. But with schools for the blind the problem is pressing for solution. Dr. E. E. Allen has said that one-sixth of all the blind children are feeble-minded and that they are practically unprovided for. A recent study and survey of this problem by Francis M. Andrews, shows that the number of retarded blind children in residential schools is increasing, but the proportion in relation to normal and superior children remains the same. Something, therefore, must be done for these children.

If it is granted that they should not remain in the present schools for the blind and if there is little hope of getting them into the schools for mental defectives, there is but one course left for those responsible for the blind: and that is the organization of separate schools. There is one such school in this country—the Royer-Greaves at King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. This is a small private school admirably conducted and might well serve as a pattern for more.

Here at Perkins we are giving thought to this problem and hope that the time will soon come when we can attack it in a concrete way. It would seem to us desirable to have a farm colony with several units upon it. Each unit would house ten or twelve pupils with a competent man and wife in charge assisted by a teacher and necessary domestic help. The programme would be adapted to the individual needs of the pupils, but would be rudimentary in character with emphasis upon work and healthy play. Custodial care would not be provided as that lies outside our province. We would seek to give to the children assigned to the Farm during their formative years such training as they are able to absorb and would aim to equip them with avocations that would be bulwarks against the demoralizing effects of idleness. As a basis for a programme can we do better

than to consider that which John Milton advocated after experience with his recalcitrant nephews?

John Milton, one may recall, sought "a better education, in extent and comprehension far more large, and yet of time far shorter, and of attainment far more certain." While for our purposes we would want to discard his ancient texts we may well contemplate the structure of his programme. "First, to find out a spacious house and ground about it fit for an academy," he advises, where those enrolled "should divide their day's work into three parts as it lies orderly: their studies, their exercises and their diet."

For their studies Milton has seven steps: (1) "They should begin with the chief and necessary rules of some good grammar," coupled with the "rules of arithmetic." (2) The next step would be "the authors of agriculture," which subject we would teach by practice in the fields. (3) Third would be "the institution of physics" which "will give them such a tincture of natural knowledge, as they shall never forget, but daily augment with delight." With us this would mean the teaching of general science. (4) Then would come ethics, "that they may with some judgment contemplate upon moral good and evil." (5) "Being perfect in the knowledge of personal duty, they will then begin the study of economics." (6) "The next removal must be the study of politics; to know the beginning, end, and reasons of political sciences"; to us, the study of civics and social responsibility. (7) "And now lastly . . . logic." As this is to lead to "graceful and ornate rhetoric" we may well omit it. But are not the other steps suggestive and comprehensive?

How modern Milton is in the other aspects of his programme. For exercise, which is for "unsweating themselves regularly" he recommends "an hour and a half ere they eat at noon . . . and due rest afterwards." For diet, "it would be best in the same house . . . and it should be plain, healthful and moderate." To carry out such a programme "will require," as Milton wrote, "sinews almost equal to those which Homer gave Ulysses." But our problem is big and its successful attack calls for strength.

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